DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 272 010 FL 015 872

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TITLE You Too Can Write German Business Letters (With a Little Help from the Computer).
PUB DATE May 85
NOTE 14p.; In: Proceedings of the Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (4th, Dearborn, MI, May 2-4, 1985); see FL 015 835.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Correspondence; *Computer Software; *Computer Uses in Education; *German; Higher Education; *Languages for Special Purposes; *Language Styles; Second Language Instruction; Word Processing

ABSTRACT

German business correspondence is an essential part of a business German course because of the difficulties involved in using the required language style and because it is integral to business practice in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. A recently published text by W. Schmitz and D. Scheiner of the Goethe Institute is reviewed and found to be the most straightforward and innovative in its approach. The review of this text provides indications of strategies for teaching the parts and grammatical structures of a German business letter. The predictability of German business letter styles also facilitates computer applications for learning and expediting correspondence. The glossary of the Apple Writer word processing program has been augmented to store a phrasebook for constructing letters. The standard phraseology for German business correspondence, as organized by Scheiner and Schmitz, has been stored. Each phrase can be called forth by number and then completed either by the student with his or her own information or by pressing another number which will supply the necessary completing clause or phrase. Some editing by the letter writer is necessary. A number of examples of German business letters are included. (MSE)

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YOU TOO CAN WRITE GERMAN BUSINESS LETTERS

(WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM THE COMPUTER)

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You Too Can Write German Business Letters
(with a little help from the computer)

John M. Grandin
University of Rhode Island

At a recent business-German conference for Germanists of the New England area the advisability of teaching German business correspondence was debated. Those in favor believed it to be mandatory; Americans planning to market abroad must be able to meet their clients on their own level, they must be able to present their products and their arguments on behalf of these products in the language of the prospective buyer. Even though many business counterparts abroad are quite fluent in English, one should not take this for granted, nor should one overlook the psychological advantage gained when approaching any foreign business associate or prospective customer in his or her own language. Furthermore, in the case of graduates from business language programs seeking employment in a German or German-American firm, it would be very difficult to write on one's resume that one is fluent in German without at the same time being able to write a letter of application or a vita in proper German style.

Those opposed to teaching correspondence in Business

German courses argued that the task is too overwhelming; the style of a German business letter is so esoteric and formal that only a native with years of training and experience can be entrusted with such a task. The vocabulary is specialized and shades of meaning are subtle; the margin of error is too great for the non-German speaker. Furthermore, German business writing style reflects a different mentality in dealing with business counterparts, which can only be fully duplicated by a native German. In short, Americans should write in English; Germans should write in German. Each side should develop a passive knowledge of business correspondence in the other's language, but not attempt to duplicate it actively.

At first glance at a German business letter such as the enclosed sample from Richard Müller & Co,[1] the untrained American student will not recognize this as the German he or she has learned in conversational classes or during a Junior Year abroad. Indeed, even his or her very German instructor might be discouraged by the thought of writing such a very hybrid prose. Not only is the outer form of the letter puzzling with its many abbreviations such as MM/ka, z.Hd., and Kd.Nr., but the writing style itself clearly departs from the spoken and written German which is generally taught in our classes. Some doubts are legitimate; can an American learn to think with extended adjective constructions and guarantee their grammatical accuracy? "Very honored Mr. Mellers, the by you with the letter of July 22, 1983

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RICHARD MüLLER & CO
Bahnhofstraße 17
6000 Frankfurt 1

Eilbrief - Einschreiben

Konexa KG
z. Hd. Herrn M. Mellers
Postfach 3189
7000 Stuttgart 5

Ihre Zeichen	Ihre Nachricht vom	Unsere Zeichen	Frankfurt, den
MM/ka	22.7.83	Mü/se	29.7.1983

Reklamation
Kd.Nr. 03/4772-M, Gesch.Nr. 3655/83

Sehr geehrter Herr Mellers,

die von Ihnen mit Schreiben vom 22.7.1983 angekündigte Lieferung ist erst heute bei uns eingetroffen, nachdem offensichtlich eine Verzögerung eingetreten war.

Bedauerlicherweise müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen, daß die Geräte noch nicht in den Verkauf gehen können, da nur eine japanische Gebrauchsanleitung beiliegt. Wir möchten Sie dringend bitten, uns umgehend 50 Stück deutschsprachiger Gebrauchsanweisungen nachzuliefern.

Ihre Nachlieferung erwarten wir bis zum 2.8.1983.

Wir bitten um Ihr Verständnis, denn wir möchten unsere angekündigte Verkaufsaktion pünktlich am Langen Samstag, den 6.8.1983 starten.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Richard Müller & CO

R. Müller

announced delivery arrived at our company only today, apparently after the occurrence of a delay." Such stylistic issues are further compounded by the presence of potentially confusing cultural issues. Can Americans be close enough to German culture to understand their specific business needs? "We ask for your understanding, for we would like to begin our announced sales program on the long Saturday of August 6, 1983."

This author would argue that German business correspondence is an essential part of a Business-German program precisely because of the difficulties involved. If we are to work effectively with German business, or indeed any international counterpart, we can become most proficient in their ways of thinking and action if we concentrate on those areas where the differences are greatest. As has often been pointed out, the language of international business is not English, but rather the language of the customer. Like it or not, German business prose is integral to the way of doing business in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, three countries which are crucial to our export business and which are now being wooed by our strongest competitors. In the following it will be shown that the hurdles described above can be overcome and that supporting systems are now available which will help us to train candidates in business German programs to feel at home with this specialized prose.

A number of texts are available for teaching German

business correspondence.[2] Of all of these, however, the recently published text by two colleagues of the Goethe Institute, Werner Schmitz and Dieter Scheiner, is the most straight forward, imaginative, and innovative in its approach. Ihr Schreiben vom... (Verlag für Deutsch, 1983) demonstrates that the initially intimidating phraseology and syntax of German business correspondence is actually quite predictable and, therefore, organizable, and learnable. Though we would rarely say in daily conversation: "Bezugnehmend auf den am 2. Mai von Ihnen unterzeichneten Vertrag..." or "Zu den von Ihnen genannten Bedingungen ist uns die Ausführung Ihrer Bestellung leider nicht möglich...," Schmitz and Scheiner demonstrate that such sentences are typical of a cultivated and specific business style. Ihr Schreiben vom... is based on the observation that German business correspondence is made up of a quite finite number of standard combinations of words, phrases, and sentences which form the general framework within which the specifics of a given business problem are housed. For example, opening sentences typically refer to the arrival of the other person's letter, or entertain a request, or notify the addressee either of good or bad news. Thus, the authors are able to list series of opening lines appropriate to these circumstances, from which the following examples are excerpted:

> Wir bestätigen dankend den Eingang Ihres Briefes vom...
> In Beantwortung Ihres Briefes vom...
> Unter Bezugnahme auf Ihren Brief vom...
> Erlauben Sie, daß ich mich mit folgender Bitte an Sie wende:

Wir freuen uns, Ihnen mitteilen zu können, daß...
Wir bedauern, Sie darüber informieren zu müssen, daß...

Depending upon the purpose of a given letter, Schmitz and Scheiner offer several categories which may follow the sentence chosen for the Textbeginn . If the letter is a request for bids on a particular project or item desired, the writer would move from an opening line (e.g., ich erlaube mir, mich mit folgender Bitte an Sie zu wenden:), to specific questions on prices (e.g., in welchem Rahmen sich Ihre Preisvorstellungen für.... bewegen.), delivery times (e.g., in welchem Zeitraum mit der Lieferung zu rechnen ist.), questions regarding quality (e.g., der Qualitätsstandard der von Ihnen hergestellten Waren.), and so on. Step by step the student is able to work his or her way through this text and find appropriate lines which become the basis for individual letters. The book does an excellent job of describing the outer form of the German business letter: Adressen, Betreff, Bezug, Anrede, Schluß, Unterschrift, Anlage and so on. Once this is established, a broad variety of phrases and sentences are supplied for Textbeginn, Textende, die Bitte, die Anfrage, das Angebot, die Bestellung, die Lieferung, die Reklamation, and Zahlung. In addition, textual material is supplied for common letters in the business world, e.g., letters of application, requests for references, letters of resignation, and the proper form for a German Lebenslauf.

The book provides exercises (with an answer key) which teach students how to combine these sentences with one's own needs and thereby form very respectable letters, which are convincingly native in style. In the fall semester of 1984 I introduced this text to my Junior and Senior business German students as a reference tool. They found that within a very short period of time their writing style became programmed to formulate letters in ways which hitherto had seemed to be unreachable. The book worked very well in conjunction with H. H. Wolff, Geschäfts- und Verhandlungssprache Deutsch (Hueber Verlag, 1974). After studying Volume I (Das Vorstellungsgespräch), the students were asked to write letters of application and a curriculum vita in German with the help of Ihr Schreiben vom...; after studying and drilling Volume 8 (Das erfolgreiche Angebot), they were asked to actually formulate competetive bids in letter form.

Given the organizability and predictability of German business style, the computer offers itself as a tool which can work together with this new text, and expedite correspondence needs even further. Since most office work is done on some form of word processor today, why not store the standard phraseology for German business correspondence, as organized by Scheiner and Schmitz, in the computer, assign a number to each sentence or phrase, and then call each forth as needed, sentence by sentence with the stroke

of single keys?

After discussing this idea with students, who responded enthusiastically to the idea, it seemed that this could be readily done by storing the sentences in the special Glossary which Apple's word processor (Apple Writer) already contains. Since the Glossary was found to be too small to contain the hundreds of necessary sentences, however, it was necessary to design a new program which would be compatible with the word processor, and thus function as an adjacent glossary or phrasebook. This program, in its current state, will store up to 500 such phrases in a given file, any of which may be called forth in its entirety by number, and then completed either by its author with his or her own information or by pressing another number which will supply the necessary completing clause or phrase. For example, under the category: Sie wollen eine schlechte Nachricht mitteilen: Schmitz and Scheiner list these possibilities:

1. Leider müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen
2. Es tut uns leid, Ihnen mitteilen zu müssen
3. Bedauerlicherweise müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen
4. Wir bedauern, Sie darüber informieren zu müssen
5. Leider sind wir in der Lage
6. Leider sehen wir uns gezwungen, Ihnen mitzuteilen
7. Zu unserem Bedauern müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen

If the problem concerns the fact that an expected delivery has failed to arrive, the text gives the following as a possible choice:

21. die Lieferung, die Sie uns mit Schreiben vom... angekündigt hatten, hat uns bisher nicht erreicht. Wir bitten um Mitteilung, wann wir mit dem Eintreffen der Waren rechnen können.

Thus by pressing number 7, the writer calls forth: Zu unserem Bedauern müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen. Before proceeding to number 21, he or she may modify that phrase by adding the subordinating conjunction daß in preparation for a dependent clause. By pressing number 21, the new information is added and the sentence now reads:

> Zu unserem Bedauern müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen, daß die Lieferung, die Sie uns mit Schreiben vom... angekündigt hatten, hat uns bisher nicht erreicht. Wir bitten um Mitteilung, wann wir mit dem Eintreffen der Waren rechnen können.

Two further key strokes will supply appropriate concluding lines such as: Für eine baldige Information wäre ich Ihnen sehr dankbar. Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Naturally the computer will not know that certain phrases are unacceptable with the verb in second position. Also it will not allow internal blanks to be filled at this stage. Thus, once the selection of appropriate sentences is complete, it is necessary to carry out certain editing tasks. The computer program described herein is written in Basic and thus works very well in conjunction with word processing systems compatible with that language, e.g., Apple Writer, the Apple word processing program. In a very simple transfer, the newly created letter can be loaded into

Apple Writer, edited, and then immediately printed as a completed document.

To expedite the editing process, it is also possible to store one's own letterhead with appropriate spaces for Aktenzeichen, Diktatzeichen, date, and so forth. For example, this author might store the following framework for business letters to Germany:

APPLEKORRESPONDENZ

65 Rockland Drive
Wakefield, Rhode Island
USA 02879

Ihre Zeichen Ihre Nachricht vom Unsere Zeichen Wakefield, den
JG/kd

Betr.:

Sehr geehrte

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Dr. John M. Grandin
Anlage

This letter format may be reproduced on the word processor with a single LOAD command, whereupon it then is ready to receive the letter created from the Letter Writer Program described above. With a few editing steps, most of which involve punctuation and placement of verbs, the completed letter may be stored on a disk for future

reference and printed for mailing as follows:

APPLEKORRESPONDENZ

65 Rockland Drive
Wakefield, Rhode Island
USA 02879

Agora GmbH
Salzburger Straße 19
6000 Frankfurt 1
West Germany

Ihre Zeichen	Ihre Nachricht vom	Unsere Zeichen	Wakefield, den
HM/jk	5.3.1985	JG/kd	15.4.1985

Betr.: erwartete Lieferung

Sehr geehrte Herren,

Zu unserem Bedauern müssen wir Ihnen mitteilen, daß die Lieferung, die Sie uns mit Schreiben vom 5. März 1985 angekündigt hatten, uns bisher nicht erreicht hat. Wir bitten um Mitteilung, wann wir mit dem Eintreffen der Waren rechnen können.

Für eine baldige Information wäre ich sehr dankbar.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen

Dr. John M. Grandin

NOTES

[1]Dieter Scheiner and Werner Schmitz, Ihr Schreiben vom... (Munich: Verlag für Deutsch, 1983), p. 87.

[2]The following is a partial list of available texts dealing with German business correspondence:

Harvard, Joseph. Bilingual Guide to Business and Professional Correspondence. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1965.

Heintz-Schuppmann, Karin and Halm, Wolfgang. Briefeschreiben - leicht gemacht. Munich: Hueber Verlag, 1971.

Horten, H.A. Commercial Correspondence in Four Languages. New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1970.

Manekeller, Wolfgang. 100 Briefe Deutsch für Export und Import. Munich: Langenscheidt, 1983.

Sachs, Rudolf. Deutsche Handelskorrespondenz. Ismaning: Hueber Verlag, 1979.

Watson, Hilde and McGuinn, S. German in the Office. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1978.